

Managing Climbing Activities in Wilderness

The National Park Service recognizes that climbing is a legitimate and appropriate use of wilderness. Climbing has a history that predates the Wilderness Act, but wilderness is a unique resource that has overriding implications for all recreation uses, including climbing. Wilderness has a special status that compels all visitors to a higher standard of ethics and conduct.

Over the past several decades, the increasing popularity of climbing, along with increased impacts to park resources because of this activity, has prompted the need for climbing management policy. The purpose of this guidance is to clarify the NPS policy on managing fixed anchors and climbing-related impacts in wilderness. It is also intended to reaffirm the authority and responsibility of park superintendents to set restrictions and establish conditions for climbing based on each park's establishing legislation and the characteristics of its wilderness.

For the purpose of this guidance, climbing is defined to include rock climbing, snow and ice climbing, mountaineering, canyoneering and caving, where climbing equipment, such as ropes and fixed or removable anchors, is generally used to support an ascent or descent.

National Park Service wilderness contains many of the nation's most spectacular and challenging climbing areas, and have been the principal location for the evolution of climbing in the United States for over a century. Rock climbing has evolved with both the tacit and explicit approval of the NPS. Climbing is among those recreational uses that are traditionally associated with wilderness and identified by Congress in the legislative record for the development of the Wilderness Act. By definition, wilderness provides outstanding opportunities for solitude or primitive and unconfined types of recreation. Providing opportunities for appropriate public enjoyment is an important part of the Service's fundamental mission. As with any human activity, however, climbing will have impacts on park resources and values.

The park superintendent has the authority to manage climbing practices. Any climbing use or related activity must be restricted or prohibited when its occurrence, continuation or expansion would result in unacceptable impacts to wilderness resources or character, or interfere significantly with the experience of other park visitors.

Climbing Management Planning

The National Park Service's Management Policies lists mountain and rock climbing as activities that parks may encourage or allow however, the policy states, "not all of these activities will be appropriate or allowable in all parks; that determination must be made on the basis of park-specific planning."

If climbing activities occur in wilderness, climbing management strategies will be included as part of the park's Wilderness Stewardship Plan or other activity level plan. Wilderness parks with climbing use will exchange information on best practices, work together on service-wide implementation and communicate with stakeholders and wilderness users. Wilderness climbing education and impact monitoring will be important components in climbing management programs.

The following general guidance is provided for the development of climbing management strategies. Climbing should be allowed where such an activity:

- is uniquely suited and appropriate to the superlative natural and cultural resources found in the park; and
- is appropriate to the purpose for which the park was established; and
- is inspirational, educational, or healthful, and otherwise appropriate to the park environment; and
- will foster an understanding of, and appreciation for, park resources and values, or will promote enjoyment through a direct association with, interaction with, or relation to park resources; and
- can be sustained without causing unacceptable impacts to park resources or values.

A park plan will incorporate, a wilderness climbing education program, as its primary means to meet these criteria. Programs will be designed to promote and perpetuate awareness of, and appreciation for, wilderness character, resources and wilderness climbing ethics, while providing for acceptable use limits. It should also focus on fostering an understanding of the concept of wilderness that includes respect for the resource, willingness to exercise self-restraint in demanding access to it, and an assumption of the responsibilities and potential risks involved in using and enjoying wilderness. The educational component will include information on how to minimize climbing related impacts and climbers will be encouraged to adopt Leave No Trace principles and practices. The cooperation of private-sector organizations will be welcome in this endeavor.

A park's Wilderness Stewardship Plan, or other activity-level plan, will contain specific, measurable management objectives related to climbing. Plans will assess levels and types of climbing use, and related issues and impacts (e.g. access and social trails; route proliferation; wildlife disturbance; vegetation removal; improper disposal of human waste; vegetation damage and soil compaction at bouldering and bivouac sites; fixed anchors, fixed lines or ladders; chipping; gluing; chalk use; noise and visual intrusions). Plans will identify wilderness attributes (including natural and cultural resources) affected by climbing activities and establish quality indicators and standards that define the desired resource conditions and visitor experience. Parks may utilize zoning or other logical management divisions for managing climbing in wilderness. Plans will also include provisions for monitoring resource impacts associated with climbing activities, and any new or changing patterns of use or trends in climbing activities, and assess their potential impacts on park resources.

A park's Wilderness Stewardship Plan or other activity-level plan will outline appropriate management actions to minimize or mitigate adverse impacts. Management actions may include limiting use, temporarily or permanently closing all or a portion of a wilderness area to climbing or specific climbing practices, and/or establishing fixed anchor or fixed equipment regulations, when required to protect wilderness resources or character. If it is uncertain whether an activity will result in unacceptable impacts or not, the activity will be restricted or discontinued until the doubt is resolved.

In accordance with NPS Management Policies and 36 CFR 1.5, any closures or restrictions will require a written determination by the superintendent that such measures are needed to:

- protect public health and safety;
- prevent unacceptable impacts to park resources or values;
- carry out scientific research;
- minimize visitor use conflicts; or
- otherwise implement management responsibilities.

Fixed Anchors

Although any climbing hardware may at times be used as or become a fixed anchor, bolts and pitons are most commonly referred to and used as fixed anchors, and nuts, camming devices and slings are most commonly referred to and used as removable anchors.

It is recognized that the use of removable anchors may reduce, but does not in every case completely eliminate, the need for fixed anchors. In practice, fixed anchors are primarily used when rock features will not accommodate removable anchors. If a particular climb requires the occasional placement of a fixed anchor for belay, rappel or protection purposes, this action, in and of itself, does not necessarily impair the future enjoyment of wilderness or violate the Wilderness Act. However, wilderness designation requires particular consideration and care in allowing those uses with the least adverse impact on wilderness resources and character. Fixed anchors or fixed equipment may be appropriate, but must be closely managed under the direction of an approved plan.

The NPS recognizes that the proliferation of fixed anchors and the associated impacts of new climbing route development present two of the greatest climbing-related threats to wilderness resources and the preservation of wilderness character. The establishment of bolt-intensive face climbs, commonly known as “sport climbs”, is considered incompatible with wilderness preservation and management due to the concentration of human activity which they support, and the types and levels of impacts associated with such routes. In the past, the illegal use of power drills in wilderness led to the excessive placement of bolts and the alarming increase of new climbing routes in some wilderness areas. In large part, the increase in the quantity of equipment left on the rock, and the elevated human use levels and associated impacts have necessitated this service-wide climbing management policy. Climbing management strategies will address ways to control, and in some cases reduce, the number of fixed anchors to protect the park’s wilderness resources or to preserve the “untrammeled,” “undeveloped” and “outstanding opportunities for solitude” qualities of the park’s wilderness character.

General Principles for Managing Wilderness Climbing

The following principles will apply to the management of climbing in wilderness and should be incorporated into a park’s Wilderness Stewardship Plan, or other activity-level plan:

- “Clean climbing” techniques should be the norm in wilderness. This involves the use of temporary equipment and anchors that can be placed and removed without altering the environment (e.g. slings, cams, nuts, chocks, and stoppers).
- The use of motorized equipment (e.g. power drills) is prohibited by the Wilderness Act and federal regulation (36 CFR 2.12). Practices such as gluing or chipping holds, and damaging or removing vegetation on or at the base of climbing routes are prohibited (36 CFR 2.1). Entering a closed area and/or disturbing wildlife, wildlife nesting, breeding or other activities is prohibited. (36CFR 1.5, 36CFR 2.2) These are regulations developed to protect all national park areas, including wilderness.
- Climbers are encouraged, and may be required, to adopt Leave No Trace principles and practices, to include packing out all trash and human waste when on or in the vicinity of climbing routes.
- Fixed anchors or fixed equipment should be rare in wilderness. Management strategies include the following:
 - Authorization will be required for the placement of new fixed anchors or fixed equipment.
 - Authorization may be required for the replacement of existing fixed anchors or fixed equipment.
 - Authorization may be required for the removal of existing fixed anchors or fixed equipment.

The requirement for authorization will be effected through a park’s Wilderness Stewardship Plan, or other activity-level plan, approved by the park superintendent. The authorization process to be followed for the placement, replacement or removal of fixed anchors or fixed equipment will also be established at the park level and will be based on the consideration of resource issues (including the wilderness resource) and recreation opportunities. Authorization may be issued programmatically within a planning document, or specifically, on a case-by-case basis, such as through a permit system. In either situation, wilderness climbing education and monitoring will accompany any authorization process.

Prior to the completion of the park’s Wilderness Stewardship Plan, or other activity-level plan, the park superintendent may approve the placement of new fixed anchors or fixed equipment on a case-by-case basis; however, if unacceptable impacts are occurring in wilderness, the park superintendent may deem it necessary to restrict or prohibit the placement of fixed anchors.

Proposals for the placement of fixed anchors or fixed equipment for the purpose of facilitating future rescue operations should be evaluated through minimum requirements analysis.

Climbing is a “high risk” sport, and climbers are solely responsible for their own safety. Many climbing routes traverse hazardous terrain, and the National Park Service is not obligated to assess or mitigate these hazards, nor is it responsible for assessing or maintaining the safety of fixed anchors or fixed equipment. While the National Park Service has the authority to provide search and rescue services to park visitors in need of assistance, there is no legal requirement to do so. All rescue activities in wilderness will be managed to provide necessary treatment and services to the sick, injured and stranded, keeping in mind the safety and well-being of rescue personnel, the victim and the public, plus “light on the land” and “minimum requirements/tool” rescue actions.

Examples of climbing management within planning documents:

1. [Joshua Tree National Park](#), 2000
2. [Rocky Mountain National Park](#), 2001
3. [Denali National Park and Preserve](#), 2006
4. [Zion National Park](#), 2007

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